

The Untranslatability of Japanese Onomatopoeia in Advertising: The Case of Food Description^{*, **}

Valeria S. Shkondina, Saint-Petersburg State University of Culture; Faculty of World Culture (Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation)

BA student;

e-mail: shkondina_valery@mail.ru

Academic Supervisor:

Ekaterina Yu. Khrisonopulo, Saint-Petersburg State University of Culture (Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation); Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics (Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation)

Associate Professor of the Department, PhD of Philology, Associate Professor;

e-mail: referent254@yandex.ru

Abstract

Onomatopoeic words constitute a layer of vocabulary that allows to convey the sounds of nature, as well as physical sensations, emotions, tastes, and odors of objects. In the Russian and English languages, onomatopoeia is employed primarily in the speech of children, whereas in Japanese, these lexical units are found in the everyday speech of individuals of all ages, in media, and in literature. However, they are not used in official documents.

Translating onomatopoeic words from Japanese into English is a challenging task due to the differences in the structure of the two languages, the varying uses of onomatopoeia, and the polysemantic nature of these lexemes preventing the full reflection of the meaning of onomatopoeic words in the target language.

Within the framework of this article, the author examines some aspects of Japanese-English translation of onomatopoeic vocabulary found in the descriptions of food products, in particular, bakery products in the section “bread” (パン), posted on the website of the Japanese convenience store FamilyMart by April 2024. Overall, 63 onomatopoeic words were found in the descriptions of 94 products. This corpus contains five most frequent onomatopoeia words that are examined in detail. Among them are such onomatopoeic words as しっとり *shittori*, which is used to describe the texture of bread and can be translated as “with soft and moist texture”; “funwari” translated as “fluffy” or “soft”; “honnori” used as an intensifier and can be translated not only as “slightly; faintly”, but also with the help of context, making the translation of other words more specific. Onomatopoeic words such as *motchiri*, *tappuri*, *kongari*, *sakusaku*, *sakkuri*, *fukkura*, *mutchiri* are also mentioned.

When translating these onomatopoeic words, it is recommended to take into account the context and use translation transformations such as specification or omission.

Keywords: Japanese onomatopoeia, untranslatability, advertising, food

* The article is published in the author's edition.

** The article was written on the basis of the report presented at the conference of the students' academic society of the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics of the Faculty of World Culture of the St. Petersburg State Institute of Culture within the framework of the section “Professional Interpreting/Translating in the Real World”, held on April 5, 2024.

Непереводимость японской оноματοпоэтической лексики в описании продуктов питания^{***, ****}

Шкондина Валерия Сергеевна, Санкт-Петербургский государственный институт культуры; факультет мировой культуры (Санкт-Петербург, Российская Федерация)

студент 4-го курса бакалавриата;

e-mail: shkondina_valery@mail.ru

Научный руководитель:

Хрисонопуло Екатерина Юрьевна, Санкт-Петербургский государственный институт культуры; кафедра иностранных языков и лингвистики (Санкт-Петербург, Российская Федерация)

доцент кафедры, кандидат филологических наук, доцент;

e-mail: referent254@yandex.ru

Аннотация

Оноματοпоэтическая лексика — это слой лексики, который позволяет передать звуки природы, а в японском языке — еще и физические ощущения, эмоции, вкус, запах объекта и др. В русском и английском языках оноματοпея используется в основном в детской речи, однако в японском языке данные лексические единицы встречаются в повседневной речи людей всех возрастов, в медиа, литературе, хотя и не используются в официальных документах.

Перевод оноματοпоэтических слов с японского языка на английский представляет собой серьезную переводческую задачу, поскольку разница в структуре двух языков, а также в употреблении оноματοпеи и полисемантичность данных лексем препятствует полному отражению значения оноματοпоэтических слов в языке перевода.

В рамках статьи автором были рассмотрены особенности перевода на английский язык японской оноματοпоэтической лексики, встречающейся в описаниях продуктов питания, в частности — хлебобулочных изделий в разделе «хлеб» (パン), размещенных на сайте японского магазина FamilyMart на апрель 2024 г. В описаниях 94 продуктов было обнаружено 63 оноματοпоэтических слова, из которых были подробно рассмотрены особенности перевода пяти самых частотных из них. Были проанализированы примеры с использованием таких японских оноματοпоэтических слов, как しっとり *shittori*, которое используется для описания текстуры хлеба и может быть переведено на английский язык как “with soft and moist texture”; оноματοпоэтическое слово ふんわり *funwari* может переводиться как “fluffy” или “soft”; оноματοпея ほんのり *honnori* служит интенсификатором и с учетом контекста может конкретизировать перевод главного слова. Были также упомянуты такие оноματοпоэтические слова, как *motchiri*, *tappuri*, *kongari*, *sakusaku*, *sakkuri*, *fukkura*, *mutchiri*.

При переводе этих оноματοпоэтических слов рекомендуется учитывать контекст и использовать переводческие трансформации, в частности конкретизацию или опущение.

Ключевые слова: японская оноματοпоэтическая лексика, непереводимость, продукты питания, маркетинг

^{***} Статья публикуется в авторской редакции.

^{****} Статья написана на основе доклада, представленного на конференции студенческого научного общества кафедры иностранных языков и лингвистики факультета мировой культуры Санкт-Петербургского государственного института культуры в рамках секции “Professional Interpreting/Translating in the Real World”, проведенной 5 апреля 2024 г.

INTRODUCTION

Onomatopoeic or mimetic words form a unique segment of the Japanese language. They not only represent sounds but also tactile experiences, physical and emotional states, and more. These words often “give an idea of something in the form of a living image, i.e. replenish the conceptual content of speech with the figurative one. This applies to different aspects of perception” [3, p. 170]. Noma’s study [11, p. 30] indicates that Japanese, after Korean, has the second highest number of such words, with over 2,000 onomatopoeia and mimetic expressions. These words are extensively used in daily conversation, literature, and media due to their expressiveness and informative nature. However, translating these Japanese onomatopoeic expressions into English poses challenges due to structural and usage differences between the languages. Unlike many European languages where onomatopoeia and mimetic words are not differentiated or are often part of children’s language, in Japanese, these words are a crucial part of the vocabulary.

Furthermore, onomatopoeia is frequently used in advertisements of various ranges of goods, especially on the packages of food items, to help consumers vividly imagine the quality of a product. However, due to the specificity of context, it can be challenging to translate Japanese onomatopoeia adequately. This paper aims to explore some peculiarities of onomatopoeia translation from Japanese into English in the case of food advertising.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Onomatopoeia, or sound symbolism, is an important area of research in Japanese, and this direction is being actively developed within the framework of world linguistics. The problem of sound symbolism is related to the problem of motivation of the language sign (F. Saussure, S. Bally), to the representational function of language (K. Bühler, O. Espersen, etc.), as well as to the question of the role of imitations in the process of language formation (G. Paul, E. Sepir, etc.).

Notable within the framework of Russian linguistics are the works of A. P. Zhuravlev [1971], V. V. Levitsky [1973], N. I. Ashmarin [1928], S. V. Voronin [1982] that made a significant contribution to the study of onomatopoeias. Japanese onomatopoeias are also studied in the works of N. I. Konrad [3], O. V. Pletner, E. D. Polivanov [1930], V. M. Alpatov [1979], and S. V. Neverov. S. A. Bykova pays attention to phraseological complexes in the context of onomatopoeic functioning.

In the Japanese linguistic tradition, the study of onomatopoeias began with the work of H. Kobayashi [9], and since then it has become one of the developing directions. Also significant in this field is the creation of special dictionaries, where attempts are made to formalize the description of meanings on the basis of a unified scheme (Y. Amanuma, 1974; T. Asano, 1978; D. Shiraishi, 1982; S. Fujita and S. Akiho, 1984).

The first attempt to systematically describe the onomatopoetic lexicon of Japanese on the basis of its symbolism was made by S. Hamano [10]. This study has attracted a lot of interest which has been increasing since then.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Onomatopoeia in Japanese encompasses a broad spectrum of emotions and sensory experiences. Not only do they signify audible experiences, but they also represent visual, gustatory, motor, and other sensations [2, p. 21]. They are equivalent to so-called “sound gestures” that often express an individual’s internal emotions and state [6].

It's noteworthy that the vocabulary of the Japanese language contains a substantial number of imaginative words that are primarily comprehensible to native speakers. For instance, ちらちら (chirachira) can be translated as 'looking through fingers' [7, p. 6]. Onomatopoeic words are distinctive as they contain the 'p' sound, usually absent in standard Japanese except for borrowed words, like in ぴりぴり (piripiri 'with a tingle', 'nervously') and ぴんぴん (pinpin 'lively').

Moreover, the Japanese language has a limited set of verbs, which some researchers interpret as a deficiency in its lexis [4] or a semantic blankness of Japanese verbs [8]. According to S. V. Chironov, onomatopoeia helps to specify, augment, or clarify verb semantics: zāzā furu is used for heavy rain, para-para furu for light rain, and potsu-potsu furu for occasional raindrops.

Japanese sound-symbolic words can be categorized into mimetic adverbs and mimetic nominal adjectives, with most of them forming idiomatic expressions when combined with the copula /suru/ [10, p. 11; 1]. While they can be translated as adverbs, adjectives, and verbs, translating onomatopoeia without context can be challenging as its semantics can significantly shift depending on the subsequent verb [5].

METHODOLOGY

This study involved using 94 food products presented in the "bread" (パン) section of the Japanese FamilyMart supermarket website. For this article, sentences containing onomatopoeias were selected from the description. In the body of this paper the presented material under study is followed by a discussion of the forms and characteristics of onomatopoeias found on the website.

DISCUSSION

A total of 94 products are presented in the "bread" section for April 2024, in the description of which onomatopoeic words occurred 63 times. The most frequent onomatopoeic word was shittori, which means "moist, wet, calm, peaceful, soft, gentle". It occurred 26 times. Depending on the context, it can be translated as "moist and soft in texture", which refines the translation through adding the indication of texture.

For example, in (1) shittori is used to describe the texture of bread, and in (2) shittori is used to convey the softness and freshness of a cupcake. Suggested translations are given immediately after the examples:

(1) しっとりとした生地には生クリームとホイップクリームで仕込んだ、スコーン6個入りです。 — 6 scones in a package with moist bakery dough, fresh cream and whipped cream⁷.

(2) しっとり食感のケーキ生地に、ダースチョコをのせて焼き上げました。 — The cake batter with moist and soft texture is topped with diced chocolate and baked⁸. The second most frequent onomatopoeia funwari (frequency = 13) conveys such meanings as 'gently'; 'airily'; 'fluffily'. It is natural to associate 'fluffy' with cake, omelette, pancakes, porridge as well as bread, as it happens in our examples given here.

Therefore, the onomatopoeic word 'funwari' can be translated as "fluffy" or just "soft" here:

(3) ふんわりとした食感の生地に、醤油を隠し味に加えた和風のツナマヨネーズとドレッシングを絞って焼き上げました。 — The fluffy dough is baked and squeezed with Japanese-style tuna mayonnaise and dressing with soy sauce as a secret ingredient⁹.

⁷ (1) <https://www.family.co.jp/goods/bread/1511055.html> (дата обращения: 10.04.2024).

⁸ (2) <https://www.family.co.jp/goods/bread/1533149.html> (дата обращения: 10.04.2024).

⁹ (3) <https://www.family.co.jp/goods/bread/1521214.html> (дата обращения: 10.04.2024).

(4) ふんわりと焼き上げたパンにくちどけの良い北海道産バター入りマーガリンとシュガーをトッピングしました。 — Softly baked bread topped with margarine and sugar with butter from Hokkaido¹⁰.

The onomatopoeic word ‘honnori’ occurring 8 times should also be mentioned. It means “slightly; faintly” which motivated the use of this lexical item as an intensifier with such words as kaoru “to smell sweet”, amai “sweet”, etc. Depending on the context, this lexical unit can be translated in different ways, resulting in equivalents that do not always convey its meaning literally, which happens, for example, in uses of the word “sweetish” instead of “slightly sweet”:

(5) ほんのり甘いチョコクリームを包んだ5個入りのミニパンです。 — A pack of five mini breads filled with sweetish chocolate cream¹¹.

(6) ほんのり香るバター風味・しっとりとした食感が特徴の食パン6枚入りです。 — Six slices of bread with a slight buttery flavor and moist texture¹².

The onomatopoeic word mochimochi, meaning “springy (texture); doughy; elastic”, was encountered 4 times. Depending on the context, different translations are also possible here, for example “elastic and chewy texture”. In this case, it is also suggested to supplement the statement with the word “texture” to clarify the translation.

(7) ひとくちサイズのもちもちとした生地、北海道産のナチュラルチーズを練り込み焼き上げました。 — A bite-sized dough with elastic and chewy texture is baked with Hokkaido natural cheese kneaded into the dough¹³.

(8) もちもちとした生地、ミートソースとチーズソースを包んで焼き上げました。 — The dough with elastic texture is filled with meat sauce and cheese sauce and baked¹⁴.

Onomatopoeic words, such as motchiri (3), tappuri (2), kongari (2), sakusaku (2), sakkuri (1), fukkura (1), mutchiri (1) also occurred in the descriptions. They also convey the texture of bread, its taste, its smell, and the choice of each onomatopoeic word depends on the properties of each bakery product individually, which must be taken into account when translating both into English and other languages. For example, the onomatopoeic word mocchiri was used to describe the texture of bread and denotes the same features as mochimochi. It can be translated as “with springy texture” or “puffy”.

Another utterance “tappuri” has plenty of meanings and can be translated as 1. plentifully; amply; abundantly; copiously; generously; fully; a lot; 2. loosely; with room to spare; with enough space; (large) enough; 3. a good (e.g. two weeks, ten kilometers); a full; at least; no less than (according to jisho.org). We face the case when the context plays a crucial role in an interpreter or a translator’s performance.

(9) ボリュームたっぷりのウインナーをしっとりやわらかなパン生地のにせ、ケチャップと粒マスタードマヨをトッピングして焼き上げた惣菜パンです。 — A hearty sausage is placed on a soft and moist bread dough, topped with ketchup and mustard mayo, and baked to perfection¹⁵.

In this case, the word tappuri is used to intensify the meaning of the word boryūmu, which means not only volume but also substantial quantity (e.g. hearty meal). Therefore, it is suggested to avoid a literal translation of the onomatopoeic word and to convey the meaning with the word “hearty”.

Onomatopoeic words used here denote texture, smell and taste, and also serve as intensifiers for other lexical units characterizing the properties of bread. In contrast to public speaking

¹⁰ (4) <https://www.family.co.jp/goods/bread/1532241.html> (дата обращения: 10.04.2024).

¹¹ (5) <https://www.family.co.jp/goods/bread/1511109.html> (дата обращения: 10.04.2024).

¹² (6) <https://www.family.co.jp/goods/bread/1511413.html> (дата обращения: 10.04.2024).

¹³ (7) <https://www.family.co.jp/goods/bread/1521214.html> (дата обращения: 10.04.2024).

¹⁴ (8) <https://www.family.co.jp/goods/bread/1523539.html> (дата обращения: 10.04.2024).

¹⁵ (9) <https://www.family.co.jp/goods/bread/1521733.html> (дата обращения: 10.04.2024).

or media texts, onomatopoeic words here are not untranslatable and should not be omitted because of different structures of the two languages. Onomatopoeic words preserve most of their meaning after being translated. However, even in this case, it is recommended to take into account the context, to clarify the meaning with the words like “texture”, etc. and to choose more frequent synonyms (e.g. ‘soft bread’).

CONCLUSION

The conducted study has shown that the use of onomatopoeic words is quite typical for Japanese food advertising, namely, in descriptions of properties of bakery products. We analyzed the products from the “bread” section of the FamilyMart website and found that in 94 descriptions of various bakery products onomatopoeic words occurred 63 times, where the most frequent words were shittori, funwari, honnori etc. As the paper shows, the translation of onomatopoeic words in the description of food products from Japanese into English is possible, but it is necessary to take into account the context and choose the most appropriate translation option among the many meanings of the onomatopoeic word.

References / Литература

1. Быкова С. А. Устойчивые словосочетания в современном японском языке. – М.: Изд-во МГУ, 1985. – 64 с.
2. Колпакчи Е. М. Строй японского языка // Научно-исследовательский институт языкознания Ленинградского института истории, философии, лингвистики и литературы (ЛИФЛИ). – Л., 1936. – 38 с.
3. Конрад Н. И. Синтаксис японского национального литературного языка. – М.: Издательское товарищество иностранных рабочих в СССР, 1937. – 375 с.
4. Румак Н. Г. (а). Ономатопея как культурологическая особенность японского языка // Молодой ученый. – 2017. – № 23.1 (157.1). – С. 21–25.
5. Румак Н. Г. (б). Полисемичные ономатопоэтические слова в японском языке // Вестник Моск. ун-та. Сер. 13. Востоковедение. – 2018. – № 1.
6. Поливанов Е. Д. По поводу «звуковых жестов» японского языка // Статьи по общему языкознанию. – М., 1968. – С. 295–306.
7. Фролова О. П. Ономатопоэтические слова в современном японском языке / Методические рекомендации. – Новосибирск НГУ, 1996. – 32 с.
8. Чиронов С. В. Ономатопоэтические слова в современном японском языке (проблемы функционирования): дисс. ... канд. филол. наук. – М., 2004.
9. Kobayashi H. Kokugo-syootyooogo-no kenkyuu [A study of sound-symbolic words in Japanese] / H. Kobayashi // Bungaku. – 1935. – № 1, 8. – P. 1313–1359.
10. Hamano S. Sound-symbolic system of Japanese / S. Hamano // Tokyo: Kurosio Publishers, 1998. – 264 p.

Для цитирования:

Шкондина В. С. Непереводимость японских звукоподражаний в рекламе: пример описания продуктов питания // Новизна. Эксперимент. Традиции (Н.Экс.Т). – 2024. – Т. 10. – № 2 (26). – С. 72–77.